A Short-Lived Churchill College Near Fairbury

By Dale C. Maley
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During the late 1960s, a small but ambitious college operated just a few miles from Fairbury in Pontiac, Illinois. Known as Winston Churchill College, the school existed for only about five years, but during that brief time, many Livingston County students—including some from Fairbury—attended classes there.

Today, the college is almost forgotten, but its story reveals an interesting chapter in local history and demonstrates how quickly the educational landscape in Illinois was changing during that era.

The idea for the college began around 1964, when community leaders in Pontiac and Livingston County discussed the need for additional higher-education opportunities. In that era, the only nearby options for attending junior college were Joliet Junior College, about 85 miles from Pontiac; Illinois Valley Community College in Oglesby, about 65 miles away; and Lincoln College in Lincoln, about 55 miles from Pontiac.

At that time, many students who graduated from local high schools hoped to continue their education but found that admission to four-year colleges could be difficult. Some students lacked the required grades or financial resources, while others needed a smaller school environment where they could better prepare for advanced study.

Dr. Raymond Dooley, president of Lincoln College in nearby Lincoln, suggested that Pontiac might support a small private junior college. Community leaders quickly embraced the idea, and it soon became a community dream to establish a new college in Pontiac.

Among the most active supporters was Pontiac attorney Tom Ewing, who later served in Congress. Working with other local citizens, he helped organize a fundraising campaign and assemble a board of trustees to guide the project.

The people of Livingston County responded enthusiastically. Businesses, farmers, and private citizens donated money and materials. Some farmers even contributed grain from their fields to help finance the project. Within a short time, the community had raised roughly $150,000—enough to launch the new college.

When the founders began searching for a name, several possibilities were considered. Eventually, Tom Ewing suggested naming the school after Sir Winston Churchill, the famous British leader of World War II.

Winston Churchill died in 1965 and was widely admired throughout the United States. His leadership during the war symbolized courage, determination, and perseverance—qualities the founders hoped their college would represent.

The suggestion was accepted, and the new school became known as Winston Churchill College. Appropriately, the athletic teams adopted the nickname Bulldogs, reflecting Churchill's reputation for stubborn determination during Britain's darkest days. Winston Churchill College was reportedly the only college in the United States ever named after the famous British statesman.

The college opened in September 1966 for the 1966-67 school year. Classes were held in Pontiac's former high school building, which dated back to the 1890s. Volunteers spent months renovating the structure to create classrooms, offices, and a library.

Dr. Andreas Paloumpis, a professor at Illinois State University, became the first president. The new school was a private, non-profit, co-educational junior college offering two-year associate degrees. Courses were designed both for students planning to transfer to four-year universities and for those seeking practical training for employment.

The first class included roughly 180 students. Many students came from Livingston County communities such as Pontiac, Fairbury, Dwight, and Chatsworth.

Although the college was relatively small, it offered a surprising variety of activities. Music programs were popular, and the mixed choir eventually included nearly a third of the student body. Drama productions were also staged regularly, including performances of Brigadoon, Oklahoma, and Inherit the Wind.

Athletics were limited but enthusiastic. The Bulldogs basketball team competed against other small colleges and improved steadily during the school's short existence. Students also organized special events such as "Spring Fever Day," which featured games, picnics, and other activities along the Vermilion River. The college quickly became an active part of the Pontiac community.

Unfortunately, the founders and promoters of the new college were unaware that a major "sea change" was imminent due to changes in Illinois state law governing community colleges. During the mid-1960s, the state created a large system of publicly funded community colleges designed to provide inexpensive local education throughout Illinois.

Within a few years, new schools such as Parkland College in Champaign and Illinois Central College near Peoria opened their doors. These tax-supported institutions offered lower tuition and larger programs than small private junior colleges. As a result, enrollment at Winston Churchill College began to decline.

For several years, the trustees tried to keep the college operating. They worked to raise additional funds and recruit new students, but the financial pressures continued to grow.

The 1970-71 school year was the last one for Winston Churchill College. In total, the college operated for about five years.

An auction was held to sell furniture, equipment, and other items from the campus. The old high school building that had served as the college was later demolished. Although the college existed for only five years, it had educated approximately 800 students.

Today, little remains of Winston Churchill College except photographs, memories, and a few artifacts preserved in local collections. Yet for a brief time, Pontiac truly was a college town, and students from communities across Livingston County—including Fairbury—had the opportunity to attend classes there.

The experiment demonstrated the determination of local citizens who believed strongly in the value of education. Even though the college did not survive, the effort itself reflected the spirit of a community willing to work together to create new opportunities for its young people.

Winston Churchill College operated in Pontiac, Illinois, from 1966 to 1971. The mascot was a bulldog.